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Negotiating refugee empowerment(s) in resettlement organizations

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Abstract: In-depth interviews with both organizational staff and refugee-clients in two American refugee resettlement organizations explore how empowerment is communicated to and understood by refugees being "empowered." This study found that while organizational staff professed empowerment focused on self-sufficiency as self-determination, in practice their communication to clients defined self-sufficiency a priori in economic terms. Refugee-clients instead constructed empowerment(s) in economic, educational, personal, and family terms. These findings highlight the need for changes in US resettlement policy and for theoretical and practical understandings of refugee empowerment to recognize polysemic and conflicting empowerments in different life arenas and from different positionalities.

Negotiating Refugee Empowerment(s) in Resettlement Organizations

More than 3 million official refugees have resettled in the United States since 1970 (Office of the Spokesperson - U.S. Department of State, 2016) and as a result, hundreds of nonprofit organizations have developed throughout the United States to help refugees negotiate their resettlement (Huntoon, 2001). These nonprofit organizations are critical to addressing refugee needs and ensuring a beneficial resettlement process for refugees and their communities (Patrick, 2004).

In the last three decades, there has been a shift in focus in the assistance provided to refugees from narrow socioeconomic assistance to a broader focus on refugee empowerment (Mitchell & Correa-Velez, 2010). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has promoted the adoption of community and participatory approaches to refugee resettlement in which refugees are seen as "agents rather than subjects" (Muggah, 2005, p. 153). The European Council on Refugees & Exiles argues "refugee empowerment is critical in refugee integration" (2002, p. 16). The mission statement for the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement begins with the sentiment, "Founded on the belief that newly arriving populations have inherent capabilities when given opportunities…" (ORR, 2012). Clearly, empowering refugees as actors in their own lives is a foundational goal of refugee resettlement policy (see Tomlinson & Egan, 2002).

Despite the significant role nonprofit organizations play in attempting to empower refugees resettling in the United States, research has yet to explore the communication content of that empowerment. In other words, as nonprofit organizations seek to empower refugees as agents, how do nonprofit staff define and communicate empowerment? Do refugee-clients in these organizations define and experience communication as empowering in the same ways?

This study explores how empowerment communication functions in refugee resettlement organizations.

Refugee Resettlement in the United States

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2014 the United Nations officially supported refugee departures to 30 countries. Of these countries, the United States of America accepted the largest number of 'official' refugees (UNHCR, 2015). The United States settled 69,933 refugees in the fiscal year 2015. Moreover, the Obama administration proposed to significantly increase quota for the number of refugees the United States accepts each year—from 70,000 in FY 2015 to 85,000 in FY 2016 and 100,000 in FY 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

In the United States, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for overseeing the comprehensive services provided to resettled refugees after arrival in the U.S. ORR funds the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP), which provides medical and cash assistance to refugees during their first eight months after arrival. ORR additionally funds Matching Grant programs, typically administered by nonprofit organizations, which provide housing, language training, job training and other essential supports for refugees after their arrival (Brick et al., 2010). The United States Refugee Act clearly articulates the goals of the resettlement program as both "to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible" ("The Immigration and Nationality Act [updated]," 2013). In fact, in order to continue to receive Matching Grant funds to aid refugees, a high percentage of refugees working with a particular nonprofit organization must have a job in the first four to six months after arrival. As a result, in

the current policy environment, employment is considered the primary indicator of refugee empowerment, integration and self-sufficiency (Brick et al., 2010).

Communication Perspectives on Empowerment

Although there are many different ways to conceptualize empowerment (for instance, see reviews in Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000), Chiles and Zorn (1995) conceptualize empowerment as both a perception and a process. In their model, empowerment includes a person's perception that he/she has the opportunity and ability to act effectively and control their environment. It also includes the processes by which that perception is enacted as a reality. Of course, individuals perceive and enact control over their own lives through interaction with others. As a result, Papa et al. (2000) argue that empowerment is a communicative process. This centrality of communication to empowerment has been noted by many scholars who explain that empowerment exists in negotiation, coordination and codetermination (Albrecht, 1988; Bormann, 1988; Rogers & Singhal, 2003).

To this point, the question of how nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations might be communicating empowerment with and to refugees has not been fully explored. This study seeks to identify how empowerment is understood and communicated by refugee resettlement staff and how those discourses of empowerment are functioning in both productive and nonproductive ways for the refugees they serve.

Empowering Clients in Refugee Resettlement Organizations

In communication research, clients of nonprofit organizations are often defined as "passive… potential recipients of pre-defined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their own needs and shaping their life conditions" (Fraser, 1989, p. 174). The interpretation and satisfaction of clients' needs is "typically not a matter of dialogue or debate;

rather clients' needs are monologically and administratively defined, not by the clients themselves, but by experts including social workers and/or counselors" (Trethewey, 1997, p. 285).

Refugee resettlement organizations specifically are asymmetrical and power laden by nature (see Harrell-Bond, 2002). Refugee resettlement organizations are gatekeepers of resources (informational, material, cultural, etc.) needed by refugees to successfully settle in their new homes. Under the traditional resettlement model, refugee resettlement organizations "focus[ed] on refugees as their object of knowledge, assistance, and management" (Malkki, 1996, p. 377). Under this model, resettlement organizations were assumed to be "expert" on resettlement and developed top-down models for "successful" refugee integration (Hyndman, 2000). This problematically assumed a monolithic refugee experience rather than recognizing that the broad diversity in refugees' experiences and meanings (Soguk, 1999).

Scholars and practitioners in refugee resettlement have problematized these traditional models. Researchers have found that clients in social services organizations generally, and in refugee resettlement contexts specifically, do communicatively interpret, resist and repurpose organizational messages in light of their own lives (Sigona, 2014; Trethewey, 1997). Theorizing has increasingly argued that resettlement interventions must recognize refugees as social actors with differentiated needs and goals (Hynes, 2003). Refugees can and should be considered primary social actors with their own knowledges, voices and goals in resettlement (Hynes, 2003; Korac, 2003; Rajaram, 2002). However, Rogers and Singhal (2003) simultaneously argue that unempowered individuals require external communication help – often in the form of a trainer or community organizer – to become empowered. Thus, a key concern in this model is ensuring

that organizational staff can communicatively facilitate empowerment without presuming the passivity, helplessness or deficiency of those they seek to empower.

It is also important to recognize that empowering refugees is complicated. Recognizing refugees as authors of their own stories requires acknowledging that these stories are being experienced, sought, and narrated in a particular social context (Steimel, 2016). Narratives are "produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices" (Anthias, 2002, p. 511). Resettlement organizations often have insufficient resources to meet refugee needs while they simultaneously have the power to decide how those resources are allocated (Harrell-Bond, 2002; Hyndman, 2000). As a result, when resettlement organizations seek refugee input, refugees often fall into using pre-defined scripts (Rajaram, 2002). If refugees need aid and their stories are constructed as the way to "earn" that aid, empowerment attempts by organizational staff will inevitably take on the expectations of the staff who can award needed aid. Thus, we must continue to seek to contrast how the communication that resettlement staff see as empowering is interpreted by the clients they seek to empower

.Moreover, while communication studies have examined the tensions surrounding empowerment communication in social change organizations, these studies often pre-suppose a definition of and path to empowerment, typically consistent with the nonprofit's goals. For instance, in their study of the Grameen Bank's programs in Bangladesh, Papa, Auwal, and Singhal (1997) found that while bank members gained economic empowerment through the strict loan repayment system and mutual accountability, that empowerment occurred through a powerful system of stringent rules enforced by both organizational workers and other client participants . As Dempsey (2007) explains, staff members, rather than the intended beneficiaries of empowerment, design and oversee the content of these rules. Though the rules are designed to

facilitate the empowerment of members, "these members did not have the ability the shape the terms of those decisions in any meaningful way" (p. 314). Since refugee resettlement organizations in the United States are working in a context where employment is considered the primary indicator of refugee empowerment (Brick et al., 2010), similar discourses may be present. Additionally, the costs of being "economically" empowered in other areas of life (e.g. empowerment in one's family life, religious life, etc.) are largely unexplored from the ***clients'*** perspectives; nor have those perspectives been placed in conversation with staff perspectives on the same "empowering" communication.

This study asks how staff in refugee resettlement organizations believe their communication functions to empower their clients. The study then asks how refugee-clients understand empowerment and how that empowerment is communicated in productive and nonproductive ways. Examining both staff perspectives and client perspectives on the communication of empowerment in refugee resettlement organizations allows a richer understanding of how those perspectives might overlap and diverge in meaningful ways. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do staff members communicate about and communicatively enact client empowerment in refugee resettlement organizations?

RQ2: How do refugee-clients communicate about and communicatively enact empowerment in refugee resettlement organizations?

Methods

This study emerged as part of a larger project examining communication perceptions of refugee resettlement staff and refugees who have resettled in the United States (see also Steimel, 2016). Participants for this study were drawn from two organizations: Catholic Social Services

and Community Action Partnership. These two organizations were selected because they are the primary nonprofit agencies working in refugee resettlement in the Midwestern city in which the study was conducted and during a pilot study (Steimel, 2010) these were the agencies that refugees listed as most critical to their resettlement experiences.

Catholic Social Services of Midwest State. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops founded the Migration and Refugee Services Division of Catholic Charities in 1975 and between 1975 and 2004, the national Catholic Charities network resettled nearly 900,000 refugees throughout the United States (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010). As part of the larger Refugee project, CSS of Midwest State resettles approximately 100 refugee families a year. In addition to physically bringing the families to the US, CSS provides a number of services, including: aid in securing housing, cultural orientation, food, medical and dental services, and job placement.

Community Action Partnership of Midwest Counties. President Johnson's War on Poverty sought, in part, to establish a community action agency in each county in the country to coordinate all programs designed to help the poor. Today, Community Action Agencies cover 96 percent of the nation's counties (Community Action Partnership, 2011). Community Action Partnership (CAP) of Midwest Counties began a Center for Refugees and Immigrants in 2004, which provides a number of services to refugee-clients, including: career counseling and training, housing assistance, ESL/naturalization support classes and interpretation/translation services.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research is built on the premise that resettlement staff members and refugees are experts on their own experiences (see Hynes, 2003) which led to an interpretive frame for this

study. My primary method of data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). As Korac (2003) explains, "qualitative interviewing is an important way of learning from refugees because it permits fuller expression of their experiences in their own terms" (p. 53). My interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage both staff and refugee-clients to elaborate on their experiences related to empowerment in nonprofit organizations. Using this protocol as a guide for discussion, the individual interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription.

Organizational staff members were defined as those individuals who represent the refugee resettlement organizations to clients. Organizational staff were recruited through a snowball sampling method and did not receive any compensation for participation. I conducted nine interviews with eight members of Catholic Social Services (the refugee resettlement director was interviewed twice). I also conducted nine interviews with seven members of Community Action Partnership (the refugee coordinator and his assistant were each interviewed twice). Some participants were interviewed twice because they contacted me with additional ideas or stories they wished to express that added depth to their original comments. Overall, six interviewees were male and nine were female.

Refugee-clients were allowed to self-identify as refugees and were gathered using a combined network and snowball sampling technique. Refugees are a difficult population to recruit for study participation, in part because their histories often give them good reason to be reticent when answering questions about their personal lives. As a result, refugees were recruited both through public fliers in the resettlement organizations and through personal contacts (of the researcher and of other participants in the study). Refugees were given an honorarium of $20 for participation, which was funded by a grant from *The Center for Great Plains Studies*. For this

study, I interviewed eleven refugees. The majority were from African nations (including six from Sudan, one from Ethiopia and one from Senegal), two refugees were from Iran and one was from Afghanistan. The refugees were given the choice whether to be interviewed in English or in their native language (through a translator). All but one of the refugees selected to be interviewed in English. One Sudanese woman chose be interviewed in her language of Neur, and she asked that her college-aged son serve as her translator. Six of the refugees interviewed were male and five were female.

Though the sample is small (26 people total), the stories were lengthy and rich and allow an initial view into how empowerment communication was viewed by both staff and refugees in refugee resettlement organizations. Each of my semi-structured interviews was transcribed near-verbatim (leaving out ums, uhs and such). Tthis resulted in over 170 single-spaced pages of data to analyze. The data were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I engaged in a repeated close reading of the transcripts to gain a greater understanding of what they contain. Second, I identified themes in the data by reading through the data and jotting down categories which appear to be consistent across both interview transcripts. Third, I collated coded data ware into those identified categories or themes, broadening and narrowing the categories as necessary to get at the underlying meaning of the data. Fourth, I checked to ensure that all of the potential tensions or themes actually fit the data in the coded extracts. Fifth, I defined and named the themes and finally I selected vivid, compelling extracts from the data to represent each theme.

To support interpretive validity, I held a data conference with other researchers and asked two of my participants to engage in member checks (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Stake, 1995). After my interviewing process, I shared my initial findings with other communication researchers in

my department at a public data conference in which other researchers were encouraged to comment on how my interpretations of the data fit what they saw when I shared the data. I also shared my initial findings with one refugee-respondent and with one organizational worker-respondent to ensure that my results are reflective of participant experiences. Though those two individuals cannot speak for all interviewees, this member checking process provides an additional safeguard that interpretive results resonate with participants in the study.

Perspectives on Empowerment: Organizational Staff

The first research question asked: How do staff members communicate about and communicatively enact client empowerment in refugee resettlement organizations? Through the interviews with staff members in CAP and CSS, I found that staff members communicated empowerment focused on self-sufficiency as self-determination. Yet, when asked specifically about practices which empowered clients, self-sufficiency became more narrowly defined in economic terms "for the good of the client."

Defining Empowerment – Self-Sufficiency as Self-Determination

When staff members at Community Action Partnership (CAP) and Catholic Social Services (CSS) were asked how they defined their organizations' goal to help refugees become empowered, the term "self-sufficiency" emerged in nearly every response. For instance, the CSS checklist that guides the conversations between case workers and refugee-clients indicates that one of the jobs of the case workers is to "explain the goal of the resettlement program – that is to help the refugee family achieve self-sufficiency" (CSS Checklist, 2011, p. 1). Jennifer (CSS) summarizes, "our main objective is to help refugees become self-sufficient as quickly as possible." Similarly, James (CAP) explains, "We're not doing them any good if we don't teach

them from day one how to survive in [Midwest Town], or wherever, you've got to, the goal is self-sufficiency."

Staff members were then asked follow up questions to help understand what self-sufficiency meant to them. Largely, staff from both organizations framed self-sufficiency as refugees determining their own goals and path with the support of the organizational staff. A number of the organizational staff members brought up the use of the Family Assessment Tools. The Family Assessment Tools are a series of forms which ask families, in conjunction with their case worker, to evaluate their current lives on 21 dimensions, including financial resources, childcare, education, career development and others (e.g. "do you have enough adequate resources to purchase food for your family?" or "Is the apartment that you are in adequate?") and then asks the refugee to rate each issue in terms of priorities (see Stokes & Brasch, 1997). Through these assessment tools, organizational workers seek to enter a partnership with a particular refugee family around the question "what is the goal for your family?" (Angela, CAP). As Angela clarifies, "not what we think is a goal for them… our family service workers will work with the adults in the household to meet whatever goals they want." Stephanie (CAP) summarized this sentiment when she explained, "They determine the path. That is not our job to decide what the next step should be."

An important part of this "determine their own path" discourse was the idea that staff should not being doing things for refugee-clients, but that refugees should be pushed to (and supported in) doing things for themselves. For instance, Kim (CSS) explains, "We don't do things for them that they determine that they can do for themselves. And that's kind of a big shock when we expect them to take over and figure these things out and do it and so, but that is the whole purpose." Similarly, John (CAP) explained that providing self-sufficiency meant "be

in partnership with the client, but the client as a lead partner. You're support… They are doing, you're helping them do. But they need to be out in the front moving, you're in the back encouraging, helping them with things they don't understand.."

A subset of this self-sufficiency as self-determination discourse was that staff had to become comfortable with the practice of allowing refugees to make their own mistakes as well. For instance, Jason (CSS) said, "You just have to draw a line and say, I'm going to help this guy with this thing [and that's all]… and he's going to bumble along, and he's going to have some things that he's going to screw up, and that's not my job." Stephanie (CAP) echoed his sentiment, saying, "They take steps forward and sometimes steps backward and turn around and try a step forward again. If they try something that doesn't work, we'll be there and if they think of and try a new strategy or if they try a new angle or just stop for a moment and lick their wounds before they go on." In total then, when asked to describe their empowerment goals, organizational staff members focused on the self-sufficiency of their refugee clients, defined primarily as a type of self-determination in which refugees could determine their own paths and make their own mistakes with organizational support.

Practicing Empowerment – Self-Sufficiency as Economic: "Get a Job!"

Despite the discourses of self-determination prominently featured in the organizational staff descriptions of self-sufficiency, in practice, empowerment and self-sufficiency were more narrowly operationalized as economic self-sufficiency, specifically as getting a job. The Catholic Social Services checklist for organizational staff describes CSS's primary goal as "the attainment of fulltime employment for all employable refugees in the family" (CSS Checklist, 2011, p. 1). CSS staff confirmed that goal, arguing that economic self-sufficiency in the form of finding a job

took precedence over other goals refugees might have (e.g. education). Melissa (CSS) tells one story:

> In the case of the woman from Iraq. . . Her sons were like 19 and 17 and they were well aware that mom had to pay, that "if we have to pay the light bill every month after 5 months of being here with Catholic Social Services, because they try to empower these families to be independent, fully functional, that we can't go to school, we have to go out to work." So, they basically, they didn't bother going to school, they just learned to work in the Muslim community, going out to get jobs and try to do what they can.

In this example, Melissa indicates that the teenage sons were encouraged by Catholic Social Servicesto choose work over school so that they could be independent in economic terms in the least amount of time possible.

Further, as Community Action Partnership's Employment Participation Rules explain, "Clients must have a legitimate reason to refuse or resign from a job." While at first glance this seems quite reasonable, "legitimate reasons" are defined as " (a) earning less than minimum wage, (b) transportation issues, (c) child care issues or (d) unsafe working conditions" (Employment Participation Rules/Regulations, 2011). What is notably absent from the list is the "legitimate reasons" of being underemployed, or of working down (in terms of pay or prestige) from the jobs you are accustomed to doing. As a result, Stephanie (CAP) indicates that many refugees are pressured to take the first available job, whether or not it fits their previous occupational experiences or expectations. She explains, "You know they might have been a professional in their country; they might have been a physician or an attorney or a teacher…they may find themselves going from a respected professional in their community to someone who is

cleaning hotel rooms." Jason (CSS) agreed, stating, "the jobs they get are the menial, folding sheets in the laundry or working, you know, the Holiday Inn or something."

While several organizational staff members acknowledged that this job transition would be "depressing for anyone to have to go through" (David, CAP), other staff members reacted with some hostility to the idea that refugees might have a legitimate reason to consider this work unempowering. James (CAP) reports that some refugees "from Arabic cultures that have just developed *expectations* over time of what America should offer them" [emphasis mine]. Through his tone, James implies that these are unrealistic expectations. Kim (CSS) agrees:

> I don't want to mention any particular culture… but I do know that there certainly are times where the refugees, especially the more educated ones, often come with the ideas that they will just have everything as they want it when they get here. And if they find out if they are educated and they really can't get a job in their field, they can get very, I guess critical and resistant, so they are complaining that they are too good to do the job that we can get for them.

As a result, refugees were not only expected to become self-sufficient by finding a job, they were often required to accept any work, rather than work that they personally found meaningful. In fact, Catholic Social Services' checklist for organizational staff also requires caseworkers to "Explain the grounds for sanctioning: quitting, being terminated for cause, rejecting a bonafide job offer" (CSS Checklist, 2011, p. 1). These rules echo the Community Action Partnership rules above. As a result, refugees could be sanctioned for quitting a job or for rejecting *any* "legitimate" job offer – certainly rules which limit some degree of self-determination in work.

Thus, while organizational messages of empowermentprofessed self-sufficiency as self-determination, in reality refugees were often *not* encouraged to determine their own path. These

organizations had set a priori empowerment goals structured in terms of economic self-sufficiency and agency rules and sanctions were used to enforce these definitions of self-sufficiency as finding a. Refugees who resisted such "get a job, any job" conceptions of empowerment were seen as unreasonably entitled rather than as holding reasonable, alternative self-determined goals.

Perspectives on Empowerment: Refugee Clients

The second research question asked: How do refugee-clients communicate about and communicatively enactempowerment in refugee resettlement organizations? Through the interviews, I found that refugee clients resisted a singular definition of empowerment and instead saw empowerment(s) in economic, educational, personal, and family terms, among others. As a result, the refugees often felt that the organizations' primary focus on economic empowerment was disempowering.

The Disempowering Process of Economic Empowerment

Though in practice both Community Action Partnership and Catholic Social Services staff members communicated self-sufficiency primarily in immediate economic terms, many refugees began by describing the ways they felt disempowered by being pushed to "work down" – in pay or prestige – from their previously held jobs. Omar (Male, Sudan) vented that in America "a qualified doctor elsewhere is made a medical attendant or a caregiver, a qualified teacher is made a teacher assistant or a baby sitter of a preschool grade, to mention a few." When I followed up about his own work experiences, Omar continued, "on my part, I have been inconsiderately reduced from an intermediate school teacher and administrator to aircraft clearer, diaper changer, and night watchman –a very degrading and stressful circumstances after having enjoyed my profession for over twenty years before coming here." Omar communicated very

strongly that the push by refugee resettlement agencies for him to accept any job left him feeling degraded and stressed rather than empowered or in possession of self-determination.

Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) expressed a similar sentiment when he argued that allowing refugees time to become integrated into their old profession (rather than quickly accepting any job) would be more empowering. Ibrahim began that as a result of organizational pressure, "they [refugees] have tried to get *any* job here, and to go into this, like if a doctor came from Africa to the United States, he would not be a doctor here unless he sits in so many exams here" [Emphasis original]. Yet, while acknowledging that re-sitting for medical exams would take much more time than finding *any* job would, Ibrahim argued in his next sentence that they should be allowed such time, saying, "And when the doors have opened for such people to help themselves to involve themselves into the system of this country, this will be very easy. That people will feel at home and then they will share how to build the country." Ibrahim feels that refugees will only feel involved and at home in their new country if they are empowered to find work meaningful to them, rather than just any job.

But, refugees largely reported not receiving the support necessary to find a meaningful job. Anai (Male, Sudan) felt especially frustrated by the order to go get a job without what he perceived as adequate support to help him find a good job. He explained that case workers:

> Don't know [that] coming here is like totally different, like, you have to learn a lot of things over again, or things that you have never learned. So, have them go through that, knowing what they're doing, and you know, making sure they're ready to be on their own, without, you know, without your help.

Anai specifically felt that "giving 'em [refugees] an assignment and not knowing what's going on is not going to help at all." So, while to organizational staff it might have communicated

empowerment to not do things for refugees they could do themselves (or to give refugees freedom to make their own mistakes), to Anai that felt like abandonment. While he did eventually find a job (though not one he liked), he did not perceive the process as empowering because he was not supported in finding meaningful work.

Defining and Viewing Empowerment – Empowerment(s) Beyond the Economic

Beyond simply finding meaningful work, other refugees talked about empowerment in educational, personal or familial terms. For instance, some refugee respondents dreamt not of attaining the job they had in their home country, but rather of taking advantage of US educational opportunities to obtain a better job here. Nyanath (Female, Sudan) told me that she had always hoped to "go back to school" in the United States. However, she felt that staff intentionally misled her away from educational programs in favor of finding a job. She indicated:

> She [the case worker] said, 'You just need to work by yourself.' Even though they have a good program, they can help you for a year if you go to school. Because, I don't know the difference, they didn't give me a choice. The person just signed me in this [job] program. So, after three months, she asked me to go out and find a job.

Nyanath felt that her case worker removed her agency by choosing a job path for her, when legally there were schooling options available, without actually telling Nyanath about all of her options.

Refugee-clients also repeatedly told me that the intense pressure from organizational staff to find a job often disempowered them in terms of their hopes and dreams for themselves and their families. Sittina (Female, Sudan) describes her experience:

> They keep saying I have to find a better job or they are going to take away the money they give us – for housing, for food. They think it is so easy. I have a number of children

> at home and I have to be able to take care of them. This means that I have to work a third shift job or I have to find a babysitter to care for them while I work during the day. Babysitters are expensive. Working all night doesn't allow me to spend time with the children. The economy is not very good either which makes finding a job hard. Right now I work… [but] the job does not offer me enough hours so [Catholic] Services says I must find a job or benefits could be removed.

From this and other similar stories, it was clear that Sittina felt that she could meet the demands to immediately find a job (even if it was low paid or had bad hours), but that would hurt her ability to care for her children in a meaningful way. She felt trapped between caring for her children and finding a job that allowed her to provide for her children, and obviously did not feel empowered in the pressure from CSS to choose. When I explicitly asked her if she felt like the requirement to get an immediate job hurt her ability to make decisions about her own life, Sittina exclaimed, "Yes, [Catholic] Services does not understand what I need. They have rules and they follow them without understanding the situation."

This sense of disconnect between empowerment through work and empowerment to meaningfully care for family was echoed by other (especially female) refugees I spoke with. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) described, "[It was] very hard for me to get a job. And I need a job that helped me to be with my kids, like from the mornings. It's very hard to find. The only choice I have, I have to go to meat company and that take all my time." Meatpacking plants involve physically grueling and dirty work, often involve very long shifts, and often leave workers exhausted. But, it was the only work Nyanath could find immediately that would allow her to watch her children before they left for school.

Muna (Female, Afghanistan) elaborates, "They [female refugees, especially widows] are the only ones that work, they provide for their families, they take care of the clothes and the washing dishes and they don't have much time to spend with their children." To Muna, this meant that refugees were forced to choose between living a meaningful life for themselves and sacrificing self-determination for their children to have a better life. Muna (Female, Afghanistan) continued:

> Ask any refugees, or immigrants, ask them "why did you come here?" the first thing that will come out of their mouths "is for my children. I don't have a future. They can have a future." And most of the migrants had professional jobs, they were doctors or engineers, or you know teachers… I don't know anyone who has gone into pursuit of what they were before, because there is just no time. Either you provide for your family or go for your own future… they give that all love to come here and then for their children.

In Muna's eyes, the limited support from resettlement agencies and the pressure to immediately find a job means that refugees are left with no time and a difficult choice between their family or their own future.

As a result, some refugees described actively resisting the agencies' definitions of empowerment by purposely selecting lower-tier jobs (though the felt they could have found a better job with more potential) in order to prioritize time with their families. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) indicates, "I know people who are very high standard people somewhere in Sudan or Egypt, but when I came here I found that they had just closed themselves in to some small job which is not really a job even, just to pay the bills and so on and that's it." Ibrahim found this frustrating because he felt that these refugees could achieve more. However, in some ways this resistance is a demonstration of empowerment in that these refugees were self-determining their

own priorities in the face of agency "employment first" discourses. The refugees I interviewed largely disputed the ideal that immediate employment should be the primary empowerment goal. Finding meaningful work, going to school and spending quality time with family were all verbalized as empowerment(s) for these refugees.

Discussion

Significant numbers of refugees are being resettled in the United States (and elsewhere) by organizations who seek to empower refugees as members of their new communities. Yet, the existing literature largely fails to ask what staff understand as empowerment, how staff communicate empowerment to refugee-clients, and how empowerment is understood and enacted by the refugees being "empowered." This study sought to understand what empowerment communication looks like from the perspectives of staff and refugee-clients in resettlement organizations.

By examining the perspectives offered both by staff and by refugee-clients, this study reveals the problematic nature of expert led empowerment programs. Though Rogers and Singhal (2003) argue that unempowered individuals usually require external help – often in the form of a trainer or community organizer – to become empowered, this study reinforces Bandura's (1997) conclusion that "Empowerment is not something bestowed through edict." (p. 477). Though organizational staff often defined their primary goal as helping their refugee clients attain self-sufficiency through self-determination, in reality the programs were structured such that self-sufficiency was defined *a priori* by organizational staff as immediate economic empowerment. Not only were programs focused on finding refugees work (any work), but refugees were controlled by rules which regulated which jobs they could choose, were labeled as "problematic" if they complained or resisted those definitions, and were sanctioned for non-

compliance. In this way, the empowerment offered by these organizations seems very similar to the empowerment defined by Papa et al. (1997). This inevitably disrupts self-determination because though the principles are designed to facilitate empowerment, the refugees did not have the ability the shape the goals or terms of those decisions in any meaningful way.

This conflict between the staff's espoused goals (self-sufficiency as self-determination) and their enacted policies (job first) is an inevitable consequence of US refugee policy. As discussed earlier, the US Refugee Act explicitly defines one of the primary goals of resettlement as economic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, US Federal funding for resettlement agencies is effectively contingent on such job-first policies. As a result, nonprofit organizational staff may have few choices but to enforce this economic model of empowerment. Beyond being disempowering, in purely economic terms, this "job first" discourse may not be particularly successful. The Capps and Newland, on behalf of theMigration Policy Institute (2015), found that unlike historical trends "recent refugees incomes have dropped relative to those of the U.S. born" (Capps & Newland, 2015). Moreover, refugees were more likely than U.S. born individuals to be "low income" in the period of 2009-2011. Thus, pushing refugees to find any job (rather than letting them renew foreign credentials or pursue schooling) may foster a less economically self-sufficient refugee population in the United States overall.

Beyond highlighting the obvious need for Federal funding models that allow more time and more flexibility to foster self-sufficiency , this paper demonstrates how organizational staff internalized economic self-sufficiency messages. At least some staff blamed refugees who resisted the "find a job/any job" communication for being bad people rather than blaming the government funding structures for limiting refugees' self-determination potential.

The refugees themselves, when asked, understood empowerment in more complicated ways. Refugee clients resisted a singular articulation of empowerment and instead saw empowerment(s) in economic, educational, personal, and family terms, among others. As a result, the refugees felt that the organizations' primary focus on economic empowerment was often disempowering for refugees in their working, personal and family lives.

Empowerment is widely understood in communication literature as the process through which individuals perceive that they control situations (see Bandura, 1997; Bormann, 1988). Theoretically, the contradiction between staff members' articulations of economic empowerment and refugees' more complicated view of *empowerments* demonstrates that the broad communicative definition of empowerment as being in "control of situations" may be problematic in that it seems to indicate a utopian universality of control. In other words, it seems that an empowered person under this definition of situational control can control all areas of his/her life. In reality, such control is elusive. As refugees explained in their interviews, gaining immediate economic control of their lives (by accepting the first job they could find) often robbed them of control over their career trajectory and/or simultaneously removed their control over their family lives. On the other hand, actively choosing to remain on public assistance (which could be understood as the refugee being in control by making choices for him/herself) was seen by organizational staff as a failure of empowerment. Thus, rather than emphasizing "empowerment" as a broad and singular concept in which an empowered person has "control," theoretical understandings of empowerment must seek to recognize multiple empowerments in different life arenas and from different positionalities.

Those empowerments may also function in overlapping and competing ways. For instance, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) argued that empowering refugees to economic self-

sufficiency through immediate work often disempowered refugees to follow larger life dreams. Conversely, while James (CAP) worried about the failure of empowerment programs when refugees chose not to pursue more than minimum wage jobs, if a particular refugee is happy working minimum wage, is it not empowering to allow him or her to decide that for him or herself? As a result, future research in organizational communication in particular should seek a richer understanding of how *multiple empowerments* (in economic, personal, family and/or educational spheres) might function in conflicting and tensional ways.

At a practical level, if funding could be provided to alleviate or extend the time frame on the job-first demand of these resettlement agencies, this recognition of multiple and potentially conflicting empowerments could actually be negotiated as part of the family assessment and goal planning process to help refugees and organizational staff partner and communicate in more productive ways. Organizational staff are already communicating that empowerment should entail self-determination. If they were not forced to equate self-determination with "getting any job," the processes are in place for staff and refugees to more meaningfully negotiate empowerment. As the process currently stands in both Community Action Partnership and Catholic Social Services, refugees meet with a case worker in order to identify family needs and goals and to develop plans for achieving those goals. Thus, in a meaningful family planning process, it would be helpful to identify what refugees' understandings of empowerment are. For instance, asking refugees, "What would it mean to you to be in control of your life?" or "What do you need to be in control of your life?" might help organizational staff negotiate empowerment with those they serve. Then, programs could be established which recognize that goals like family and financial stability do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Limitations and Conclusion

Several limitations are important to note for this study. First, this study had a small sample size (26 individuals in total, only 11 of whom were refugees). Though the richness of their stories made eleven interviewees an acceptable number for this study, certainly eleven individuals recruited through public fliers and the use of network and snowball sampling cannot represent the experiences of all refugees to migrate to the United States. Additionally, the fact that 10 of the 11 refugees who opted to participate in this study spoke English means that these refugees may be more highly educated or more similar in demographics than is typical of all refugees. The single refugee who was not interviewed in English chose her son as her translator, which may also have shaped her interview responses. The lack of a second translator to verify his translations is also a limitation. Moreover, all participants interviewed were resettled in or working as staff in the Midwest and communicative experiences in refugee resettlement organizations across the country may vary significantly.

Nevertheless, this study highlights the importance of actually studying what empowerment communication means to those staff who employ it and for those clients in social change organizations who are "empowered" by it, rather than simply assuming that organizational staff definitions of empowerment are productive and meaningful to the clients they serve. Future research must continue to seek the voices of staff, refugees clients as well as other alternative organizational members in fully defining what empowerments communicate to diverse people interacting in organizational contexts.

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